

Statement of Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-MA)
House Floor Debate on H.Con.Res. 460
Wednesday, June 23, 2004

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of House Concurrent Resolution 460, which endorses President Bush's April 14, 2004 letter embracing the disengagement plan proposed by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza and parts of the West Bank.

Critics have expressed concern that President Bush's letter prejudices the final outcome of negotiations on sensitive issues like borders and refugees. However, the President and Secretary of State have indicated that it does not undermine the fundamental requirement that all issues be mutually agreed upon in final status negotiations.

The problem right now is that Israel has no reliable Palestinian partner capable of negotiating a final status agreement. Israel's disengagement plan responds to the void left by the failure of the current Palestinian leadership to lead. I would also suggest that the Israeli disengagement initiative is in the interests of Israelis and Palestinians alike. It will help Palestinians to take concrete moves to establish a democratic state, and it will help preserve both the Jewish and democratic character of Israel over the long term while contributing to its security.

It is also important to remember that policy articulated in the President's letter is consistent with the peace negotiations initiated by President Clinton at Camp David. Those negotiations took into account the fact that the Palestinian claim to an open-ended right of return would be demographically untenable for Israel's future as a Jewish state. The Clinton negotiations also operated on the premise that the final settlement negotiated in accordance with UN Resolutions 242 and 338 would involve mutually agreed-upon adjustments to the 1949 armistice lines to provide Israel with secure, recognized, and defensible borders that reflect demographic realities and to provide the Palestinians with territory for their own state.

By passing this resolution today and expressing its support for the April 14 letter and the disengagement plan, I believe Congress can help show its support for an enduring and sustainable peace settlement in the Middle East.

Months of cooperation and shuttle diplomacy between Washington and Jerusalem led to a White House meeting on April 14th, 2004 and an historic agreement between President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon on some of the most important issues in the conflict. That agreement was included in a letter the President sent to Prime Minister Sharon, enunciating a number of principles that are specifically referenced in the resolution before this House today, among them: the need for Israel to have defensible borders that reflect demographic realities; the need for Palestinian refugees to understand

that they will not be returning to Israel; the need for Palestinians to end their campaign of terror and for Israel to have the ability to defend itself against that terror.

H. Con. Res. 460 strongly endorses the principles articulated by in the April 14th letter and sends a strong, bipartisan show of support for that agreement.

These principles are clearly framed as subject to future negotiations between the parties. They lay out basic parameters that reflect the reality of the Middle East today and, as such, could play a useful role in helping promote realistic peace negotiations.

The resolution also expresses support for “efforts to continue working with others in the international community to build the capacity and will of the Palestinian institutions to fight terrorism, dismantle terrorist organizations, and prevent the areas from which Israel has withdrawn from posing a threat to the security of Israel.”

Such efforts are desperately needed, as it will not be possible to reach a comprehensive solution to the conflict in the Middle East until the Palestinians renounce the use of terror and return to the negotiating table. Today, for example, we know that Palestinian terrorists are continuing to smuggle guns and explosives from Egypt into Gaza. Recent press reports indicated that the terrorists are now using an elaborate network of tunnels to carry out such smuggling. For example, a May 16, 2004 article that appeared in the Jerusalem Post reported that:

“A short list of items smuggled via the tunnels to terrorists in the Gaza Strip includes Katyusha rockets, mortars, shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank grenades, large amounts of explosives, ammunition, and rifles. The arms come from Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, and Libya. The underground smuggling is necessary because the navy has successfully blocked attempts by Palestinians to smuggle weapons into Gaza via the sea.

“The army frequently conducts operations along the Philadelphi Route and in the outskirts of Rafah in an attempt to uncover and destroy the tunnels. One of the painstaking tasks is similar to that in which the five soldiers died on Wednesday evening: boring holes meters under the ground, placing explosives to blow up tunnels.

The IDF has uncovered and destroyed 11 tunnels this year – and close to 100 during the past three and a half years.”

As Israel proceeds to withdraw from Gaza, the Bush Administration needs to put pressure on the Egyptian government to shut down these terrorist smuggling tunnels. Egypt is a substantial recipient of U.S. economic aid and an ally of the U.S., and it has a responsibility to ensure that its borders are not being used by terrorist organizations seeking to smuggle weapons into Gaza for use in terrorist attacks against Israel. The President and Secretary of State Colin Powell need to take forceful action now to convince Egypt to shut down all of these smuggling tunnels at once.

In closing, I believe that this resolution reflects the strong bipartisan support which exists in the Congress for Israel's security, and for the conclusion of a Middle East Peace agreement that is consistent with the protection of Israel's security and self-determination for the Palestinian people, including a Palestinian state.

I urge adoption of the resolution.